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CHAPTER III

LAND, LABOR, AND MONEY

A PEASANT'S life in spring and summer centered around the narrow strips of earth which surrounded the village. If the scene of labor was distant from the village, the tired workers who had been at their tasks since sunup often spent the night in the field rather than trudge the long way back home. In the middle of the morning, at noon, and again in midafternoon, the toilers stopped long enough for food, sometimes only bread and salt, and a little sleep. The burning noonday sun sifted through the leaves of the solitary tree beneath which the people sprawled. Fragile rays danced upon tired faces, old-fashioned costumes, a hand raised to brush away a fly, and oxen chewing lazily. Like animals the peasants worked, like animals they slept; but when harvest time brought an end to their toil they experienced the joyous satisfaction of work well done.

The average farm was about eighteen acres in size and was composed of sixteen separate and widely scattered strips. (See Table 10, Appendix I.) This land sold for a comparatively high figure because of its nearness to Sofia, but not because of any superior quality. In fact, most of the soil was sandy and gravelly, with a mixture of heavy clay.

In addition to a house in the village and his land, the peasant also owned a few animals and agricultural implements. The work animals numbered fewer than two for an eighteen-acre holding, and the plow was the only large implement found on every farm. More than any other joint operation, plowing had the flavor of an antique ritual. At dawn a slow procession moved from the village. The distant Balkan range loomed vaguely blue far across the Sofia plain, and the golden dome of Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia shone in the thin, clear light of morning. Behind the village, the slopes of

fluences in order that the forests might be efficiently protected and he advocated the militarisation of the foresters as the best way of achieving this aim. The grazing of cattle in the great timber forests accounted for their gradual deterioration and transformation into stunted brushwood. This was due to the shortage of pasture land, of which there was only enough for feeding four million head of cattle, while the number of cattle in Bulgaria was fourteen million. The requirements of this head of cattle is about five million kilogrammes of fodder, 4/5 of which is supplied from the forests, the foliage of the trees being used as such. Goats did the greatest harm, there were 250 of them per thousand inhabitants in Bulgaria, 750 in Greece, 150 in Serbia and 25 in Rummania. By these ratios one could also gauge the relative condition of the forests in these countries.

The gradual decrease in local precipitation which is of such importance to the cultivator, as well as the resulting inundations, with the appaling destruction they cause in the fertile valleys, all of which may be traced to the unchecked felling of the forests has begun to make itself felt. We thus find deputy N. Terkalanov declaring in the Sobranye on December 11, 1928, that the yearly loss from drought could be reckoned as amounting to a reduction of the crops by 180,000 tons of cereals, 20,000 tons of industrial cultures, 10,000 of vegetables and 100,000 tons of fodder, of a value of two milliard leva. The loss caused by drought during 1934 was estimated at five milliard leva, though the harvest was an average one. Big losses were also incurred through inundations, the river Kamtsia alone caused damage amounting to 3·5 millions annually.

Travellers in the Balkan regions cannot help noticing how vast expances of once fertile land are getting buried deep beneath tons of rubble and sand, sent down by

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mountain torrents, this being plainly attributable to the extensive disafforestation of the mountain ridges of this chain. The gorge of the river Isker, which might rival in scenery certain parts of Switzerland, has been largely denuded, with the consequence that extensive damage is being done yearly to the road and railway running through it by floods. The trains are often held up for hours by the boulders and debris washed down. It would be well if the slopes of the denuded mountains were afforestated anew with conifers which the herds of grazing animals would not attack, for in spite of regulations, the peasantry possessing cattle far in excess of the grazing capacity of the region will persist on sending them to graze in the forests. The afforestation of the Isker gorge would be well worth undertaking in view of the thousands of tourists who visit it every holiday during summer, special excursion trains being run from Sofia, providing as it does most charming outings for excursions and walks.

Investigations into the not very remote past history of Bulgaria, establish that the devastation of forests are comparatively of recent date. The French traveller Ami Boué records in 1854 that the Vitosh mountain overhanging Sofia was covered with thick forests; these have been cut down and it only sustains a meagre growth of shrubs, though steps are being taken to afforestate it anew. According to M. A. Ihtchiev, Turkish judges mention in their notes that the highway from Slivnitsa to Sofia ran through alleys, and big trees, and that rice and the vine were cultivated in the region at the time, This is no longer possible now owing to a change in the climate since then, and as for the big trees, not a vestige of them has been left. The region of Pleven was at the time of the Russo-Turkish war fairly thickly wooded, but now it is practically denuded.